

Lister Sinclair

Good evening and welcome to *Ideas*. I'm Lister Sinclair with Part 2 of David Cayley's "The Education Debates," a series of 15 broadcasts about current issues in education. Tonight's program is about the school curriculum and features the widely divergent views of two eminent American scholars. Both agree that schooling today lacks the focus of a coherent curriculum and badly needs to find a new one. But they differ in their sense of what it should be. E.D. Hirsch stresses the elements of what he calls "cultural literacy", a common body of knowledge which can form the foundation of a healthy civic society. Neil Postman emphasizes the need for a central narrative in the program of school studies which will allow students to acquire and organize knowledge within a framework that is coherent to them. Professor Hirsch will be heard in the first half of the program. Professor Postman in the second. Part 2 of "The Education Debates" by David Cayley.

David Cayley

When I graduated from university in 1966, the President of the college surveyed my classmates and me in our mortar boards and gowns and then intoned a formula that had probably been in use for hundreds of years. "Welcome to the company of educated men," he said. The remark was pompous and sexist, but for all that, it still conveyed the idea that we were supposed to have acquired at least the rudiments of a common intellectual heritage, something that would allow us to understand others of our civilization and be understood by them.

Education throughout its history has had a prescribed content, allowing those who share it a foundation on which conversation and citizenship can build. In mediaeval times, one learned the seven liberal arts, the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric and the quadrivium of astronomy, geometry, arithmetic and music. Over time, the content of the curriculum changed, but the idea of a common course for all students persisted for a long time. Until the 1960s in Ontario, for example, all students were required during the five years of secondary school study to complete the same five courses in history, courses that were supposed to provide an overview of Canada as a North American society and Canada as an inheritor of classical, Western and British ideals. This curriculum has now largely vanished, replaced by a cafeteria high school with fewer required courses and many more electives. The situation is the same in the United States, where E.D. Hirsch calls the condition that prevails "curricular chaos." Hirsch has addressed this condition in a recent book, The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them. He proposes the reinstatement of a carefully organized, fully specified common curriculum. E.D. Hirsch is Professor of English at the University of Virginia and the President of the non-profit Core Knowledge Foundation, which provides curriculum to 200 participating elementary schools in 37 states.

He first became widely known in 1987 when he published Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know. This was where he first advanced the claim that a shared body of knowledge is essential to the exercise of intelligence and to the practice of democracy. The idea dawned on him, he says, while he was doing research on the teaching of written composition and had to test the reading comprehension of a group of students.

E.D. Hirsch

These students at a community college in Richmond, when they could understand the instructions for taking the test, then couldn't understand many of the passages. They could understand ordinary passages, like "why I don't like my roommate" or that sort of thing, but they couldn't understand a description of the end of the Civil War — Lee's surrender to Grant at Appomattox court house. That puzzled them because they didn't know the references. And this was in Richmond, Virginia. And

you have to understand Appomattox court house is a short drive away from where we were sitting doing these tests. There is a big equestrian statue of Robert E. Lee on the main drag in Richmond, Virginia. So this was so disorienting to me that that began my looking into what was going on in the schools that had left these students in such a state of ignorance about history and about many other things.

David Cayley

Hirsch's interest in schools was new at this point, but he had been working for some time on the idea that "it takes knowledge to make knowledge." In the early sixties, he published two books on romantic poetry, but then began to turn increasingly to philosophical questions about how writing is understood and interpreted.

E.D. Hirsch

A great deal of what is being said is not said explicitly on the printed page but has to be understood as tacitly shared knowledge between the writer and the reader. And the same is true in speech. When I speak to you and talk about colleges and universities and so on, I don't have to define what those words mean. I don't have to define, in my example, what the American Civil War is. I can take certain things for granted and that always is happening in speech. There has to be a shared body of knowledge that is taken for granted. We have to agree on what you don't have to define. That certainly is understood by anybody in radio broadcasting. It's understood by any newspaper reporter. There are certain things that you can just write about and other things that you have to explain. So that's the structural situation in linguistic communication. Things are taken for granted.

Now, what's taken for granted has to be shared and what's shared has to be known to be shared by the people participating in the communication. So it's a purely structural reason why the body of shared knowledge has to be defined because that's the only way communication can occur. I think that's what has to be understood. So that insight from my theoretical work prepared my mind, I suppose, for understanding that the neglect that these students had fallen into in their earlier education was impairing their communication skills and, not just their ability to communicate with strangers, but their ability to understand the morning newspaper or their ability to understand a book addressed to a general reader. And so they couldn't be fully economically autonomous people and they couldn't be autonomous citizens, either. It was a very serious issue. And what Cultural Literacy challenged was the idea that reading and literacy is simply a mechanical decoding kind of skill and you don't have to worry about the background knowledge that students gain in their school careers.

David Cayley

Cultural Literacy challenged the well-worn progressive dogma that process is what counts in education. This doctrine currently appears in many forms, asserting, for example, that since the world is now awash in information, what is important is not acquiring a specific body of knowledge but, rather, "learning how to learn." Corollaries hold that academic disciplines are specifically Western ways of dividing up the world, that there are no right answers and so on. Hirsch's new book, The Schools We Need, extends his critique of these ideas.

E.D. Hirsch

Cultural Literacy was an attack on educational formalism, the idea that you only needed to learn how to do things. The new book continues that but is also an attack on what I call "educational naturalism", which is the idea that students will learn the things they need to learn in their own way, at their own pace, without an elaborate guided curriculum on the part of the teacher. And that idea or

set of ideas is associated with the progressive movement in education and it has pretty much taken over as the dominant point of view in our education schools. And I see this double whammy of really ineffective naturalistic teaching plus an emphasis on form rather than on content as being tremendously disadvantageous to underprivileged students and so the very people who preach political progressivism and educational progressivism at the same time are really defeating their own social purposes. That's the basic premise of the new book, that these naturalistic approaches to teaching, which assume that some providence will make the students grow at their own pace in a natural way, is highly misguided and it's deleterious socially.

David Cayley

Hirsch believes that the effect of these misguided views has been to produce what he calls a disaster in American public education. Its extent can be seen in a steep decline in average scores on the scholastic aptitude tests or SATs which American high school seniors write for college admission. And the worst of this disaster, he says, is that its impact has been very unequally distributed.

E.D. Hirsch

Children who come from educated homes, whose families are themselves educated and who are very solicitous about the education of their children are managing to provide their children, both through what they hear at home and by a more formal schooling, with the things they need to know to be competent people. Those people in the United States — and that's by far the majority — who depend on our public schools to become competent people, are not receiving the kind of education that will, in fact, make them competent, and so as you know, back in the sixties, there was a precipitate decline in SAT scores, in verbal scores and in math scores, and everybody wondered, why has this precipitate decline occurred? Meanwhile, of course, there hasn't been any significant decline in the scores of the most favoured and elite families in the United States. And so I consider the widening education gap and the widening income gap to be defeating the whole purpose of a democratic education, of the whole idea of a common school or a public school as being essential to the aims of a liberal democracy.

David Cayley

You're speaking from a position commonly understood to be of the left, that is, against the growing polarization of American society, and from a position commonly thought to be of the right, in favour of conservative educational reform. I find in Canada that the assignment of people to one or other of these camps is supposed to be exclusive. I wonder if you would address this question of what you call premature polarization and what it's doing to attempts at educational reform.

E.D. Hirsch

Well, my most scornful point about that polarization is that it has no logic to it, that is, there's no logical connection between educational progressivism, which is just romanticism, and wanting to see a more equitable society, which is one of the traditional aims of the progressive left. There is no inherent logical connection and so I, first of all, think it's a failure of thought and a failure of imagination. It's just a kind of knee jerk reaction that if you're on the left you're going to believe in kindergartens and if you're on the right you're going to believe in giving all children a rigorous education. It was because there is no necessary connection between those two positions that, for strategic reasons I used the figure of Antonio Gramsci in my recent book, The Schools We Need, as a sort of emblematic figure. Gramsci thought it was absolutely essential for poor people to learn what he called this "intellectual baggage" so that they could grasp the levers of power. Because without that baggage, they would not be able to wield power, to take over power. And in fact, if by

some political revolution, the poor were to dominate or were to get more power than they now have, they wouldn't be able to use it effectively or wield it effectively because they wouldn't be able to communicate effectively. That has been a theme, actually, through both of my books, that these learning skills and communication skills depend on knowledge and they depend on this basic shared knowledge, this privileged knowledge. And just simply to call it elite is a mistake because if you bring everybody into that club, it's no longer the possession of the elite. But as Gramsci saw — and nobody would call him a person of the right, as you know, Gramsci was imprisoned by Mussolini as a very dangerous communist intellectual. Gramsci saw that until you enfranchised poor people intellectually and educationally there could never be an equitable society. And so I thank heaven for him because he at least makes it respectable to say that, political radicalism or socialism or the belief in social justice requires educational conservatism. That was his point. It's my point. I also think it's accurate.

David Cayley

The scientific accuracy of his ideas is a critically important part of Hirsch's claim. He doesn't see himself as putting forward a new educational ideology, but rather as replacing ideology with solid, empirically grounded knowledge. In this sense, I think he'd agree with a statement by Doug Carnine, an educational reformer at the University of Oregon. Carnine says, "I think education is at the point medicine was about 160 years ago — the point when it discovered that most of what it believed was wrong." Hirsch, with similar confidence, asserts that naturalism and formalism are not just contestable, but flat out wrong.

E.D. Hirsch

The romantic ideas of schooling have been a disaster because there's an assumption that nature will provide, that all things will come out right if the child is allowed to grow at his or her own pace, in a natural way. And that is a unworkable, impractical and theoretically naive position. And furthermore, it is seen that it doesn't work. And it's obvious that ever since these ideas have taken over in our schools, that school performance has declined and the education gap as well as the income gap among students has widened. So that's my big objection to formalism is that it's just plain wrong. And an even more critical point in this is we know that the romantic tradition in education has failed. I think this is the critical point. You've got to know when to fold a losing hand.

The romantic tradition in education has not worked and it cannot work. So we need to change.

David Cayley

The influence of this romantic tradition on education traces back to what was called the progressive movement. It took shape at Columbia University's Teachers College in the early years of this century and its most influential exponent, Hirsch says, was a professor there named William Heard Kilpatrick. Most of what Kilpatrick promoted remains familiar today — the open classroom, the project method, emphasis on self esteem and rejection of tests, grades and pre-set curricula. One reason this process-centred philosophy was attractive to professors of education, Hirsch thinks, was that it gave them a subject of their own. The implementation of mass public schooling required the training of many new teachers. And the professoriate who trained them needed a way of defining the new profession of education.

E.D. Hirsch

The professoriate felt it had to have a subject matter of its own. I know this well because English professors also had felt they needed a method and a subject matter of their own and people who teach writing have felt that they needed a subject matter and a method of their own. It's a normal

tendency, professionalization, part of becoming an intellectual discipline. The trouble is that the only domain left for the education professoriate was method, process. After all, the chemists knew about chemistry and the physicists knew about physics. And presumably the literature professors knew about literature. So what was it that the education professors were supposed to know? Well, they needed to know education history, education theory, but there also was a tendency to say, well, you don't have to know much about physics, you don't have to know much about chemistry or about literature. You really have to know how to teach and how to look things up and how to do things. So there was a natural tendency to aggrandize the idea of process.

David Cayley

Glorification of process and playing down of the established curriculum brought education faculties into contempt with their academic colleagues. The section of Broadway separating Teachers College from the rest of Columbia University got the nickname "the widest street in the world." Irving Babbitt, an eminent professor at Harvard and a leader in the revival of classical humanism, wrote in 1932, "Our professors of pedagogy are held in almost universal suspicion in academic circles and are not infrequently looked upon by their colleagues as downright charlatans." Isolation and disdain, Hirsch argues, created something of a fortress mentality.

E.D. Hirsch

There is a circling of the wagons and a defensiveness against the rest of the university because they have been attacked for second-rate research and wrong theories and for not turning out very effective teachers because they haven't been doing what Horace Mann asked them to do, which was to keep their eye on practicality, rather than a lot of useless theory. So I do see resentment as being a strong motivation. I even see it happening early on among graduate students in education. They develop this sentiment of they're against us and we're right and we're more virtuous than those mandarins are.

David Cayley

Despite this defensiveness and resentment in the citadels of education, Hirsch has made considerable progress with his Core Knowledge Foundation. When he began, he says, there was little in the way of curriculum in American elementary schools and what there was varied across the country. Now, his network of 200 schools in 37 states at least demonstrates the possibility of a consistent national approach.

E.D. Hirsch

I thought that there's simply not a possibility, given our traditions, of having a national curriculum. It's not going to happen. It's certainly not going to happen in my lifetime. I doubt it will ever happen.

But on the other hand, we do need a national curriculum. And so I thought, well, maybe one could take the good old Anglo Saxon approach, as Johnson did in his dictionary, and say, look, let's present something and see if it catches on. And if it catches on, there could be at least a *de facto* commonality of 50%. That was, in fact, followed by most of the schools because it made a lot of sense to do so, particularly if you have a social conscience about the students who move in the middle of the year from one school to another in tremendous numbers in the United States. And particularly when you turn to the inner city, the so-called mobility rates become over 50%. Very high.

And you have to try to make the educational experience of those students more coherent than it now is. They're the students who need that coherence the most.

David Cayley

Do you see education as difficult in the current climate, with a population that, as Neil Postman says, is amusing itself to death? Have new difficulties been created or not?

E.D. Hirsch

I don't think so. I'm very sceptical of those views and I also think that, in some ways, they attempt to get the schools off the hook for having failed. I have seen first grade classes, kindergarten classes, second grade classes, third grade classes, children still remain very eager to learn all of those things that other children know and that the adult world knows. There's almost an inborn hunger for culture in young children. And children are so proud of themselves when they do accomplish this knowledge. But then, you see, if you're not providing them with interesting nourishment and the knowledge they need along the way, then they tend to divide into two camps, both of whom are bored. There are the students who already know the material you're presenting in the later grades because they're advantaged children and they are being bored by the public schools, and they throw the spitballs and let their minds wander. And then there are the disadvantaged children at the other end who are humiliated and they're also bored and annoyed and angry. And I think that none of that need happen if, at the very beginning of schooling, you give children the competence that they need to be good students. And this is actually our experience at Core Knowledge Schools. There are now in the United States quite a few schools that are following the Core Knowledge sequence from kindergarten through sixth grade and even seventh and eighth grade and the children are turned on. They're not blasé. They're very enthusiastic and very excited.

David Cayley

The Core Knowledge curriculum is addressing the problem E.D. Hirsch thinks is most critical in American education, the growing inequality of educational outcomes between classes. Hirsch writes in *The Schools We Need*, and I quote, "Between 1942 and 1966, that is, in the period before the anti-subject matter theories of the 20s and 30s metastasized throughout the schools, public education had begun to close the economic gap between races and social classes. Since then," he says, "the gap has widened tremendously." And this, finally, is his overriding concern — to make public education once again an engine of equality.

E.D. Hirsch

The central motivation of my work from the start was the sense that these students, these children, are being excluded from the club, they are being cheated, they're going to be stuck in the same socio-economic class that they were born into. The whole hope that schooling could provide greater equality of opportunity and greater social mobility, that hope was not being fulfilled in our public schools. That is the main motivation of my work. And you're asking me, well, why do I think that schools can overcome that? It's become schools have overcome it in the past and they are our most hopeful agencies for equal educational and economic opportunity and I see absolutely no reason why they can't be again. The big barrier that I've come to see to this happening is not a failure of will or a desire to hold people down. Teachers really are some of the most idealistic people in American society and they want the best for their students and their children. Sometimes they give up on them because of their experiences, but that's because they're caught in a faulty system. We need to repudiate the ideas that have sponsored progressivism and the slogans that have sponsored progressivism. It takes a long time to change ideas, but the reason I used John Maynard Keynes' statement that it's ideas rather than vested interests that are responsible for good and evil as the epigraph to my book is that I firmly think of this as a battle of ideas, not a battle of social circumstance or of resources. Ideas got us into this mess and it's ideas alone that can get us out of it.

David Cayley

E.D. Hirsch bases his argument for a common curriculum on empirical grounds. If we want to be competent and well understood by others, we need to acquire the elements of cultural literacy. These elements are simply the existing coin of the intellectual realm, not things that Hirsch asserts are inherently good to know. That would be a philosophical claim and it is Hirsch's expressed intention to lead debate away from philosophy and in the direction of what has been proven to be practically effective in schooling.

Neil Postman, whom you'll be hearing in the balance of tonight's program, takes a rather different approach. He agrees that education ought to have a common curriculum, but he bases this curriculum's claim to our attention on explicitly moral and metaphysical grounds. Neil Postman has been writing on education since 1969 when he published Teaching as a Subversive Activity. He's a native New Yorker who has spent his whole teaching career in the Department of Culture and Communication of New York University's School of Education. He can also claim honorary Canadian citizenship insofar as he traces his intellectual lineage back to Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and others of the so-called "Canadian school" of communication studies. In 1995, he published The End of Education, an essay which spells out what he thinks it will take to get public education past its present difficulties. Last year I visited him at his office at New York University and he told me that what had inspired him to write was his sense that the crisis of public education is, at bottom, a crisis of belief.

Neil Postman

Americans don't believe in anything any more. The children and their parents and the teachers have no overriding transcendent narrative, as I call it in the book, that gives them a good answer to the question: What are schools for? There are two answers that we currently give, neither one of which is of transcendent significance. One of them is that schools are to help kids get a job. The other is that schools are to help kids become competent in the uses of computers. I'm not against kids getting prepared for good jobs, and it's all right with me if they learn how to use computers, but I think we have to come up with some better reasons for all of this. I mean, President Clinton, in one of his recent State of the Union addresses and even, I think, in his inaugural speech said that the goal of education — I emphasize the word goal — in the 21st century is to have a personal computer available for every student. He didn't say that was the means for anything. That in itself, he believed, was the goal. So in thinking about all this, I came up with the idea that what we really need, if the public school is to be revitalized, is some sort of story, some narrative that would give young people and their teachers and their parents some deep and abiding sense of the significance of learning. And so the book, the title of the book, which I thought was more than cute, has a built-in ambiguity to it. I called it The End of Education, and the word 'end,' of course, has two meanings. One, the finish of and the other the purpose of. And I was hoping that both meanings would play against each other so that I'm trying to say, even in the title, that unless we can find some deep purpose for education, then we'll come to the finish of it, especially the finish of public education.

David Cayley

What currently threatens to finish public education, in Postman's view, is what he calls privatization. By this he means something more than just the recent appearance of private contractors in the field of education. He means to refer to any form of school choice that would allow schools to become an expression of the world views of particular groups or classes. A school could be privatized in this sense while still remaining nominally public. The key point for Postman is that it would no longer be infused by a unifying public purpose.

Neil Postman

One of the reasons the privatization of schooling has caught on is that, in America now, there's so many different groups, each of which has its own story to tell. And so they want their own schools. So the blacks want an Afro-centric curriculum and the Koreans want a Korean-centric curriculum and the Hispanics a Hispanic-centric curriculum. Well, why do they want this? They want it because the public schools have been unable to provide all their children with any binding significant stories. Each group has its own story to tell, and we're getting a fragmentation of schooling, with each group saying, well, the public school has no story to tell that gives the children a transcendent belief in learning, but my specific group does. So why don't we have each group develop its own schools? Well, that's certainly the end of public schooling. My idea is that the public schools, as they once did here in America, have to begin thinking about the question, what are schools for and, in particular, have to begin thinking about organizing the education of the young along the lines of some important narrative. We once had some in America, one of which was that America was the home of democratic political life and, for that reason, was a kind of moral light unto the world. That gave us authority, by the way, to educate everyone else in the world about democracy. I'm not saying that everyone else in the world appreciated that, David, but nonetheless it was a powerful story. And Americans believed in it. It gave a kind of purpose to school. Here's another one. America is the great melting pot. When I went to school, here in New York City, by the way, it was a very powerful narrative. We were going to school to become Americans. Sitting in my classroom, when I was in the first and second and third grades, were children whose first language was not English, who were Greeks and Germans and Italians and Eastern European Jews and what have you. But the idea — we all accepted it and our parents believed in it and our teachers believed in it — was to make us into Americans. So there were these narratives that really gave a kind of substance to the idea of the public school. Now all of those stories have weakened and we see it in the fact that each different group in America wants to start its own schools and have its own curriculum because they think they've got a story that will give to the children a sense of meaning in education. I did the whole book in the wistful hope that we might preserve the idea of public education, if, in public schools we could find stories that would help to bind our people, irrespective of their ethnic differences. So I tried to think of some stories. I do say in the book that these are just ideas of mine, that the whole point of the book is to get teachers to start thinking about this. Because, as I note, most conversations in America about schools are about engineering problems. They're technical. They're about the means for learning. How should we use computers? How should we teach reading? How many children should be in a class, et cetera. I'm not saying those are unimportant problems but they're not about what is school for. And I was hoping that the book would arouse an interest in that question so that we could start thinking about narratives. And I came up with five. One of them which seems to have gotten a number of teachers interested is the Space Ship Earth, the idea that we're all crew members on this space ship going around the sun and we have an obligation to the planet to become stewards of the planet. Now, that idea, you could call it the ecological story or whatever, happens to be very attractive to young people especially; and I tried to describe in the book how it might be possible to organize the learning of the children around that idea. But I also put forward some other possible narratives. My favourite, which I know no one will be interested in at all, I call the Fallen Angel, the idea that we are all fallible and that what human beings do most of all is make mistakes. That's the fallen part. The angel part is that we're capable of correcting our mistakes. And so I was thinking that we could organize the learning of our young around the story of human error and our heroic efforts to overcome error. And I think if we actually took this seriously, one of the effects of it would be to downplay the possibility of arrogance among people because their whole education would stress the idea that we've always made errors. I quote

Jacob Bronowski from his television series when he's standing in Auschwitz and he talks about all the people who were killed there. And he says, this happened because human beings thought they had the knowledge of the gods. They were certain that they knew the right way. And when people are certain that they know the right way, it usually ends up in a cemetery for some people. So this idea of the fallen angel, human beings as the error-prone species, I think would be a wonderful possibility to organize education around.

In any case, David, I tried to come up with five narratives that hold out or would hold out the possibility of organizing learning. And I say at the end of the book, look, I don't know if these are the best, but they do represent an attempt to give to schooling some sort of transcendent purpose and that that's what we have to try to do. And if we cannot come up with some narrative that will do this, then we're going to get privatized schooling, each group making up its own curriculum from its own story, like the Catholic schools do and the yeshivas of the religious Jews, who want their own schools. And then the African-Americans will want their own schools and so on. And that will be the direction we'll go. I don't say that it's without some merit. I mean, there are things to say on behalf of that kind of fragmentation, but I think overall it would be a great loss for American culture.

David Cayley

The other three narratives that Postman proposes are the world-generating power of language, the principle of diversity, or how the world's cultures have intermingled, and finally, the American Experiment, which would look at the pattern of trial and error in American history. But in addition to these new narratives, Postman also wants to preserve some old stories. One such is the story of the school as the laboratory of democracy.

Neil Postman

Traditionally, one of the main purposes of schooling was to teach the young how to function as members of a group. It's true that groups don't learn, individuals learn, but the idea of school learning is to learn how to be a member of a learning community. And in the process, learn how to be a citizen in a democratic society. So the socializing function of schools has always been there. Now, I worry a little bit about all these people who say that computer technology allows every student to learn at his or her own pace. They don't really need other students. Maybe that's true, David, but we still then have to say, does that defeat our purpose or help our purpose. I mean, if we say, one of the purposes of schools is to help the young learn how to live in a democratic society, how to be part of a community, how to contribute to its social cohesion, then we might decide, we don't really want individualized learning, or too much of it, in the schools. We want group learning so kids will learn how to share. But I'm open to discussion on this. It's just a question I'm asking. If a parent came to me and said, my David is very smart and he knows the things you're teaching, why should he be held back because other children don't? My answer would be, first of all, it's probably not likely David's going to be held back very much, it's not going to hurt him too much if he has to be patient with those children who aren't as smart as he is. Maybe I'll even ask David to help some of the kids understand fractions. I know David's known fractions since he was three years old, but there are these children who just can't grasp it and David might help them. It would be a good thing for David to do. And even if he doesn't want to do that, it's not going to hurt him a lot to see that everyone is not as smart as he is about fractions, and he may even discover that there are a couple of kids in the class who don't know fractions as well as he does, but they know other things that David doesn't know. And that's one of the things we want David to learn when he's here, that this institution is not just about David, that it's a socializing institution and that means learning how to function in a group. De Tocqueville, in his great book, Democracy in America, worried about

individuality. He thought this would be a danger in America, that we would make a cult of the individual and that would be very harmful to the development of democracy. So schools have always worked against that tendency, the idea that, yes, David, we know how smart you are, but this fifth grade class is not just about you. You're part of a group so you have to learn that and you're still going to end up going to Princeton, David, don't worry about it because that's an elite group and you look like an elite, if I ever saw one. But there still are other things you've got to learn about how to get on with someone who's not going to go to Princeton.

David Cayley

The public school puts inherently unequal people on a footing of equality. It doesn't just teach democracy; it embodies it. The medium is the message. This principle is central for Postman and he says that almost every book he's written has been, in some sense, a commentary on it. He thinks that the importance of the school as a communal medium is now greater than ever in the face of the expanding power of communications technology. Many modern media of communication are inherently isolating and demand counterweights, if we are not to sink into a permanent consumer psychosis. Postman speaks of managing the media ecology, an expression McLuhan first used in a letter to Claire Booth Luce. Postman, with McLuhan's blessing, adopted it as the name of the program he directs at NYU.

Neil Postman

We have to keep the media ecology in balance. And if it's so that all the new media promote private experience — I know all about the Internet, but it's still a privatized experience — then that's all the more reason that schools should be emphasizing the social experience because outside of school everything is the machine and me. In New York — I'm sure you have it in Canada — you see young people walking down the street with a Walkman on. Now, what does that mean? I mean, they're closing themselves off from street experience in this privatized world of music or whatever. They don't even want to interact, so to speak, with what's happening on the street. So if all that is true, then I think we have to say, well to get some balance back the schools become especially important in creating a sense of social cohesion and community.

David Cayley

Postman recognizes how difficult it will be to create this sense of cohesion. He's aware of the depth of the moral and cultural fissures that now cut across American society and of the seemingly irreconcilable differences between groups. He acknowledges that calling his book The End of Education was, in his own words, "an ambiguous prophecy." But he says, finally, whatever the odds, he's not going to quit without a fight.

Neil Postman

I refuse to answer No to the question is there nothing that can bind us together. I know you're a Catholic and you're a Baptist and you're a Jew and you're something else, and I know you're Hispanic and you're black and you're from Scandinavia. I know all that and I know you have your different traditions and that's fine. But we're Americans. Is that devoid of content? I want to be on the side of those who say let's not give it up yet, let's see if there's something we can do to restore it. And if we lose, then we lose. But I want there to be a little bit of a fight before we give up.